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Eastern Illinois University

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Contextual Conditions Related to the Undergraduate Experience

and the Nature of Alumni Involvement: A Qualitative Study

(TITLE)

BY

Kasey G. Evans

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Science in College Student Affairs

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2015

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Contextual Conditions Related to the Undergraduate Experience and the Nature of
Alumni Involvement: A Qualitative Study

Kasey Evans

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ABSTRACT

The researcher used qualitative methodology to analyze the perspectives of 5 alumni of a mid-sized Midwestern institution regarding their experiences as an undergraduate at the institution and the context of their current relationship with their alma mater. Overall, participants placed a value on giving back to the organizations and groups that they were most involved with as an undergraduate. The participants do not currently give to the institution financially but would like to in the future. The study suggests that undergraduate context is vital to future involvement with the institution.

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to both my undergraduate and graduate alma maters and the people who make them great. Thank you to Illinois Wesleyan University and Eastern Illinois University for instilling in me a sense of tradition and pride that has motivated me to pursue a career helping students and alumni to find their own path and create their own memories within their collegiate experiences. My time spent with Kappa Delta Sorority and the College Student Affairs program have also been focus areas related to my experience and my desire to do more for these two institutions. Thank you for being the context that motivates me to give back to my alma maters. This is for all of you.

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A thank you and “hooray” goes to my cohort. I’m so glad to have had you all to lean on throughout the thesis process and our time within our masters program. We did it!

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	i
Dedication.....	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
CHAPTER I- Introduction.....	1
Personal Statement.....	3
Purpose of the Study.....	6
Research Questions.....	6
Significance of the Study.....	7
Limitations of the Study.....	7
Definition of Terms.....	8
Summary.....	9
CHAPTER II- Review of Literature.....	10
Common Characteristics of Involved Alumni.....	10
Job Attainment for Today's College Graduate.....	19
The History of the University Career Services.....	24
The Role of Career Services and Student Perceptions of its Resources.....	27
Altruism and Social Exchange Theories.....	30
Summary.....	31
CHAPTER III- Methodology.....	32
Design of the Study.....	32
Participants.....	32

Research Site.....	34
Instruments.....	35
Data Collection.....	35
Data Analysis.....	35
CHAPTER IV- Findings.....	37
Research Question 1- Undergraduate Experience.....	37
Extra-Curricular Involvement.....	37
Academic Fit.....	39
Sense of Community.....	41
Research Question 2- Engagement with Career Services.....	43
Resume Guidance.....	43
Career Services Events.....	44
Established Relationships.....	46
Research Question 3- Career Preparation.....	47
Internships and Hands-On Experiences.....	48
Sense of Preparedness.....	50
Career Satisfaction.....	52
Research Question 4- Methods of Giving.....	54
Extra-Curricular Volunteerism.....	55
Professors and Academic Departments.....	56
Research Question 5- Elements of Involvement.....	57
Financial Contribution.....	57
Awareness of Need.....	59

Personal Experiences.....	61
Summary.....	63
CHAPTER V- Discussion.....	64
Significance of Findings.....	64
Feelings Toward Alumni Role.....	64
Undergraduate Context and Involvement Areas.....	66
Perceived Career Assistance.....	68
Recommendations.....	70
Suggestions for Future Research.....	72
Conclusion.....	73
REFERENCES.....	74
APPENDICES.....	79
APPENDIX A: Informed Consent Form.....	79
APPENDIX B: Interview Protocol.....	82

CHAPTER I

Introduction

With the increased need for alumni support in order for institutions to remain functioning within their existing financial brackets, alumni giving and involvement must be assessed by observing the overall satisfaction of alumni in terms of their university's assistance with job attainment and reaching career goals (Wastyn, 2009). Many factors influence whether alumni of a university choose to stay involved with their institution following graduation. Current donor financial status and ability to give are important considerations when looking at alumni involvement, as when looking at any decision making process related to a monetary contribution (Hunter, Jones, & Boger, 1999; Mulugetta, Nash, & Murphy, 1999; Tsao & Coll, 2005; Weerts & Ronca, 2009). Related involvement factors can include: the success of students in terms of academic achievement (Cunningham & Cochi-Ficano, 2002), their satisfaction with the university faculty and offices they interacted with while undergraduates, and their views of the assistance they received in terms of future career goals and job attainment from university support services such as Career Services (Hunter, Jones, & Boger, 1999; Tsao & Coll, 2005; Weerts & Ronca, 2008).

The academic success of graduates increases the financial donations received by that institution. Cunningham and Cochi-Ficano (2002) noted that "an institution's average donation per alumni increases by between \$61 and \$87 for every standard deviation (120-point) increase in lagged mean SAT score" (p. 552). The greater the academic caliber of the student, the more financially successful the alumni will be in their career, which is a contributing factor to donative behavior (Cunningham & Cochi-Ficano, 2002).

Individuals with a higher family income maintain an increased donor status, specifically business executives who give more back to universities due to their increased financial capability (Hunter, Jones, & Boger, 1999; Wunnava & Okunade, 2013). Even in other academic fields, such as journalism, the higher the income of the alumnus or alumna, the more likely they are to make a donation (Tsao & Coll, 2005).

Similar to academic success, if alumni have the perception of faculty support and visibility during their undergraduate experiences they will have greater levels of involvement. Decreasing the faculty to student ratio will result in greater revenue from alumni (Cunningham & Cochi-Ficano, 2002). The level of satisfaction with the undergraduate experience (a measure through which faculty and staff support is essential) is necessary for increased alumni involvement. Taylor and Martin (1995) recommended that student development professionals serve the university's advancement by helping to create positive experiences with their students. Weerts and Ronca (2009) found that alumni who rank satisfaction with their undergraduate experiences as very or extremely positive would give more financially to the institution. In noting this contributing factor to alumni involvement, some universities have instituted programs that engage students during their undergraduate experiences to create positive relationships with faculty and staff. Ideally, this will contribute to the level of alumni involvement in the future (Mulugetta, Nash, & Murphy, 1999).

Hunter, Jones, and Boger (1999) noted that career preparation from the university was a large indicator of whether or not alumni of Livingstone College chose to be donors at the university. Career assistance increases the likelihood of alumni involvement due to the invoked feeling that the university contributed to their success. Alumni who felt they

had received career assistance from their MBA program were more likely to give money directly back to that department (Johnson, Thomas, & Peck, 2010). A study conducted by Fouad, Guillen, Harris-Hodge, Henry, Novakovic, Terry, and Kantamneni (2006) showed that students express a need for career guidance and a career service center on campus, but less than half of them are even aware of the offerings of the career service centers. Noting the positive effects of career guidance with alumni involvement retention, it is crucial to analyze improvement methods for publicity of resource availability.

However, we know that not all students take advantage of the opportunities available to them from their university career service centers, so it is important to not only investigate whether they viewed their university as helpful in their job search process, but also if they utilized the resources provided to them (S. Rich, personal communication, October 31, 2013).

Personal Statement

As an undergraduate student, I was very involved as a student leader on campus. I dedicated a large portion of my time to my sorority chapter through leadership roles such as recruitment chair and president, and placed a lot of energy into ensuring the chapter's success. I also contributed to the university through my involvement in English department activities, working as a writer for the Office of University Communications. During my senior year I served as one of the members of the Senior Class Committee. Those of us serving on the Senior Class Committee worked to spread awareness about the importance of giving back to the university, helped the alumni office obtain contact information for our classmates once they had graduated, and assisted with collecting the funds and leading the discussion regarding our senior class gift. Through this

involvement, I learned a great deal about the importance and necessity of alumni engagement with the institution, especially on a financial level. During my senior year, I successfully secured donations from approximately one eighth of our class by discussing the importance of giving back and helping those that would follow in our footsteps at the institution. I also set up a five-year pledge to donate \$20.12 to the annual fund each year. While it was not much, I knew that my regular giving, even in a small amount, would assist the institution with the percentage of donors it had.

As graduation day came and ended with much less pomp and circumstance than I imagined, I loaded all of my belongings into my car and road back home to Tennessee with my parents and younger sister. I arrived home jobless, unsure of what I wanted to do with my life, and extremely unhappy with all of my newfound free time. I was conditioned to be busy, constantly surrounded by others and working on some project or task. I suddenly only had one task—find a job. I felt lost and not ready to commit to any big move where jobs in my field would more likely be found. I was an English major looking for work in anything from journalism to event planning to student affairs. Even then, I believe I knew I wanted to be in student affairs, but I had not been convinced yet that additional years in school and collecting debt would be worthwhile. I moved to Bloomington, IL thinking I would be happier living in the town of my undergraduate institution with a friend who was student teaching. Due to some personal life crises, my friend ended up moving home with her parents a little more than a month into my stay. So, once again, I was mostly alone, and I was bored, looking for work. I finally took a position with a call center just to have an income, but I was unhappy. The job was with an insurance company following Hurricane Hugo on the east coast. I did not enjoy the

mostly menial work, and due to my quick transition to the company, I did not feel much company loyalty. In fact, I disagreed with how the company had handled the hurricane, and I greatly empathized with and felt for the victims calling in to place claims. In essence, I was just the front line. I could take down their information, but I could not help them much beyond that, and I could not quote to them how quickly help would arrive. It made me feel awful. Within a few short weeks, I quit, and once again loaded up my car and moved home to Tennessee. I quickly found work in Tennessee in another call center, this time in the healthcare field, and was not surprised to find I was not any happier. I did not enjoy my work; I did not view myself as making a difference in the lives of anyone else. In addition to already hating my job, I commuted nearly two hours each way. I felt like I was wasting my life on the road and in this menial job.

Throughout this approximately 9-month period, I was very distant from my undergraduate institution. While I was in Bloomington, I had applied to a few positions at the university, and found myself upset and viewing my institution as disloyal when I did not even receive an interview or a notice of the decision not to interview. In my mind, they had trained me for the workforce and provided me with my applicable experiences, so if they did not feel I was qualified for an interview or a position, then they had not done their job properly. Luckily my annual fund payment notice would not come until after this 9-month period, when I was in the process of applying to graduate schools, as I believe I would have cancelled my gift. Immediately following graduation, I emailed our alumni services office asking how I could volunteer and give back to the institution. However, by the time they responded, I was already frustrated with the institution, and no longer wanted to assist them.

After a few months, I finally realized that I would have to be the one to make the change and find happiness through a career. I could not continue in a job I hated and expect it to magically get better. Following interviews and applications with multiple schools, I finally accepted an offer with my current institution and my current graduate assistantship. I am happy. I am in the right place, and I am now doing work that I find great value and purpose in through graduate school. And, I continue to give my annual gift promise, in addition to making a few other donations throughout the year for campaigns and donation requests from my undergraduate institution. This past summer I even began volunteering my time serving as the online class newsletter editor for my graduating class. I now desire to give back to my institution since I do have the job satisfaction and purpose that I always anticipated would result from obtaining a college degree.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the contextual conditions related to alumni involvement with their undergraduate institutions. A secondary purpose is to investigate the patterns and means of engagement between alumni and career service centers. A search for meaning will examine the alumni's awareness of resources, undergraduate involvement, and job attainment satisfaction. Therefore, a qualitative approach will be utilized to analyze themes that emerge from participant interviews.

Research Questions

The following research questions were developed by the researcher and will be used to guide the proposed study:

1. What is the context of the participant's experience as an undergraduate?

2. What were the interactions and engagements between the participant and career services during the undergraduate experience?
3. What are the opinions and feelings of the participant in terms of his or her job attainment?
4. In what ways are participants involved with their undergraduate institutions?
5. What elements affect the participant's decision to engage with the university?

Significance of the Study

As funding cutbacks occur, universities are finding the use of their alumni to be instrumental for both their financial backing and to fill the roles as volunteers that additional staffing would have previously covered (Harrison, Mitchell, & Peterson, 1995). There are also new positions being created by universities whose specific purpose is to network with alumni to ensure involvement (Daly, 2013). With these in mind, it is critical to analyze in what way the university is lacking and what barriers these professionals will encounter when beginning to work with new generations of alumni. It is also significant to study the awareness and usage of the career service centers on campuses if a correlation is found between job success and alumni involvement.

Limitations of the Study

In conducting any qualitative study, there are certain limitations that will occur based on the nature of the research. Limitations will include the comfort level of the participants with fully engaging in the interview and providing in-depth responses (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). While the researcher will work to establish an element of rapport between herself and the participants, participants' comfort level with the topic could create limitations. Another limitation of qualitative research is the small sample

size used to collect data due to the methodology used when conducting interviews (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). Along these lines, the researcher will need to establish a level of trustworthiness and credibility with the participants while simultaneously working to avoid the creation of any biases during the course of the interview to prevent additional limitations from occurring (Yin, 2011).

Another limitation to this study is the fact that these participants agreed to participate in this study, which is a form of giving back to their undergraduate institution, even if they were not intentionally aware of this.

An additional limitation to this proposed study is that it will be conducted utilizing alumni from one mid-sized Midwestern University, which could affect the generalizability of the results. Factors relating to the awareness and usage of the career services on campus could vary from university to university and possibly even within this sample of participants due to differences in staffing and university-related goals, missions, and desired outcomes of the career services while the participant was an undergraduate.

Definition of Terms

Alumni. Any individual who attended the institution and graduated with an undergraduate degree (Meer and Rosen, 2012).

Career Services. The office on campus whose mission and duties are to serve as a resource to students in the areas of career attainment, career advancement, resume building, and post graduate education (McGrath, 2002).

Involvement. Any contribution given to the university, whether it be voluntary time given or a monetary donation as a donor (Newman & Petrosko, 2011).

Summary

Universities need the support of their alumni in order to function both in terms of finances and basic operations. Involvement from alumni is an essential aspect of the modern day university. There are many factors that influence the decision of alumni to become involved or not. A sample of alumni of a mid-sized university will be studied to find if two of these factors are job attainment and satisfaction. If these two factors are found to have an impact on alumni perceptions of their involvement, then the awareness and utilization of the career services on campus will be vital in helping universities increase their alumni involvement rates.

CHAPTER II

Review of Literature

Previous research on alumni involvement has addressed and presented a variety of factors that indicate a positive correlation to alumni involvement as well as those factors that are more likely to indicate an alumnus or alumna who is not involved. Research on the reasons why alumni choose to not be involved (or at times are not involved due to a lack of awareness) is fairly prevalent. This section will examine the variables found in both scenarios from previous studies and will discuss the reasons alumni involvement is necessary. This literature review will highlight existing efforts of universities to engage alumni and create programs to increase their active alumni networks.

Common Characteristics of Involved Alumni

First and foremost, involved alumni are those who have had meaningful experiences while undergraduates on campus or who have formed important connections with university staff as alumni (Daly, 2013; Garvey & Drezner, 2013; Mulugetta, Nash, & Murphy, 1999; Newman & Petrosko, 2011; Palmer & Koenig-Lewis, 2008; Taylor & Martin, 1995). Alumni often base their decisions to make a financial contribution on their personal satisfaction with both how the program or university is currently being run and how satisfied they are with their personal success based upon the preparation of their program and university (Newman & Petrosko, 2011).

The identification of a meaningful undergraduate experience has been represented in many forms in the existing literature, all with connections to increased alumni giving. “When students have more positive experiences and memories of their undergraduate years, they are more likely to give their time and financial support as alumni” (Garvey &

Drezner, 2013, p. 213). One area where this statement resonates specifically is through the spectrum of undergraduate athletic involvement, specifically for men. An alumnus has a higher likelihood of making a financial contribution (usually designated as a donation for his sports team) if the sport in which he was a part of was successful while he was an undergraduate (Meer & Rosen, 2009). Meer and Rosen note that universities will often focus their advancement efforts based on football or basketball team success, but this study's results showed that the success of the football or basketball team is not as important to the alumnus as the success of the team he participated on. The researchers found that not only was the team's success while the participant was an undergraduate impactful, but also the success of the alumnus's team after he has graduated. The giving of the alumnus would increase by 7% if his former team were to win a conference championship. The relationship between athletic involvement and alumni involvement was not found to be statistically significant for females (Meer & Rosen, 2009).

While Meer and Rosen (2009) did not find the conference championship success of the university's football and basketball teams to be statistically significant in relation to alumni giving, Wunnava and Okunade (2013) did find a correlation between the two when analyzing the gift giving patterns of business executives to their alma maters. They note that the athletic programs increase the quality of student life on campus, and as such make for a more satisfactory undergraduate experience. So, in this case, athletic success is related to the emotional experience, a factor that is noted to contribute to alumni involvement by Palmer and Lewis (2008).

Involvement in other extra-curricular campus activities has also been found to be a high predictor of alumni involvement. In a study conducted by Taylor and Martin

(1995), they found that from their participants, 23% of those designated as high level donors were involved in the fraternity and sorority community and 30 % of the high level donors indicated participation in another extra-curricular club or organization. Hunter, Jones, and Boger (1999) found similar results from their study of Livingstone College in North Carolina. The average female donor from this university was involved with the Greek system as an undergraduate. This involvement and satisfaction with their alma mater extends beyond solely the extra-curricular and into the academic realm. The ability to have access to faculty and engage with them through open dialogue with multiple points of view has an impact on student satisfaction with the university (Weerts & Ronca, 2009).

In noting that involvement is increased when students feel a greater sense of satisfaction and connection to their alma mater, some universities have begun to create programs that help to build this relationship before the individual becomes an alumnus or alumna of the university—starting as early as the admissions process. In their 2012 study, Meer and Rosen investigated the relationship to giving that legacy families have with an institution—and the correlation is beneficial for the university. While they point out that not just any family member is likely to donate more due to admittance of a younger family member to the institution, there is still a positive correlation and a benefit to these types of familial-institutional relationships. Meer and Rosen (2010) cited a quotation from the *Detroit News* to make this point: “When you have families who have a longstanding connection to the university, there is a level of engagement that’s of great value to the institution; they’re more likely to give time and services, like recruiting and fund-raising” (p. 656). Their study found that legacy status and admittance have a strong

correlation to alumni giving, when the student admitted is from a younger generation than the alumni member (Meer & Rosen, 2010).

Universities have also been creating programs at the undergraduate level that specifically aim to create a culture of giving back to the institution. In a study on the Cornell Tradition Program, Mulugetta, Nash, and Murphy (1999) found that while there was no direct correlation between future alumni involvement and participation in the program, there was a higher level of job attainment for participants.

As indicated by Tsao and Coll (2005) in their study on a journalism and mass communication department, “three major factors (program communication and involvement with alumni, alumni satisfaction with the quality of their journalism education, and personal income of graduates) contribute to the intent of alumni to make donations” (p. 390). This may apply in other disciplines, as well, and even to an entire university in terms of reasons for alumni contributions.

As effective communication is a contributing factor in an alumnus or alumna’s decision to give, it follows that this defines one characteristic of alumni involvement. This is done through the outreach of the university advancement offices, which are a growing trend in higher education (Daly, 2013). As stated previously, satisfaction with the university is an important role, but that satisfaction needs to extend into the alumni years in order for the alumni-university relationship to persist in a positive manner (Daly, 2013; Garvey & Dresner, 2013). Newman and Petrosko (2011) observed many variables in an effort to discover what characteristics align with alumni decisions to become involved in an alumni association. An awareness of other members in the group made an alumnus or alumna 2.45 times as likely to join the group, and was found to be one of only

two statistically significant demographic variables resulting from the study. As a result, it can be said that alumni need to be aware of the existence of these groups in order to become involved in them.

As shown through Daly's (2013) research, universities have begun to take note of the implication of a lack of alumni involvement on their campuses, and in response, have taken a few different approaches to engage alumni at a greater level. One way to increase communication, and therefore increase involvement is to reach out to alumni through mediums that they use in their daily life, such as Facebook. Lawson, Kleinholz, and Bodle (2011) conducted a study on one psychology department's efforts to engage alumni through Facebook. In utilizing social media outlets, universities gain the opportunity to engage in a manner that is meaningful and convenient to the alumni, which will in turn increase their satisfaction with the programs they were involved with as undergraduates (Lawson, Kleinholz, & Bodle, 2011). Social media usage allows institutions to be more easily connected with alumni who are actively seeking engagement with the college or university. Tsao and Coll (2005) confirmed the importance of communication and interaction with the institution in order to keep alumni engaged and involved. In analyzing alumni donations to their journalism and mass communication department, they found that those who read and enjoyed the alumni newsletter had a greater likelihood of giving back to the program.

Another variable impacting alumni involvement or lack thereof is whether or not advancement staff are making active efforts to engage affinity groups which represent minority populations from their campuses (Garvey & Drezner, 2013). If it is important for alumni to know members of the alumni association in order to become involved

(Newman & Petrosko, 2011), then universities must make efforts to establish relationships with these minority populations. “Alumni discussed, prior to getting involved in the LGBTQ-affinity group, drifting away from their alma mater was a natural progression because they had no direct connection to the institution” (Garvey & Drezner, 2013, p. 209). Alumni noted that their involvement with this affinity group increased their comfort with giving to the university as they felt a greater sense of connection and ownership to their alma mater.

The financial abilities of individuals play an important role as to whether they are able to financially contribute to their alma maters, and will often reflect on involvement in terms of volunteered time as well. Graduates of departments with the highest paying job prospects, or from activities that indicate high earning prospects, have been found to contribute more financially to their institutions (Meer & Rosen, 2009; Newman & Petrosko, 2011; Wunnava & Okunade, 2013). It seems natural, then, that the highest noted contributors are generally males from either a business major or sports extracurricular background, as these typically lead to higher paying job success (Wunnava & Okunade, 2013). However, this extends to areas beyond the business world in that those with higher income levels from public relations and journalism careers were also found to have a higher likelihood of making a financial contribution (Tsao & Coll, 2005). Hunter, Jones, & Boger (1999) found that the average alumni donor of Livingstone College had a collective family income of \$60,000 to \$100,000 per year, indicating that a mid-to high income level increases the likelihood of being a donor.

Involvement with Greek life has been noted as a predictor for alumni financial support. In fact, affiliation with a Greek life organization was found to be one of only

three discriminant factors that indicated a high-level donor status as opposed to a lower level of giving (Weerts & Ronca, 2008). A study conducted by Hunter, Jones, and Boger (1999) supported these findings in that their typical female donor was a member of a Greek organization.

A majority of the studies cite that gender impacts monetary contributions. Dvorak and Toubman (2013) found that while men do contribute financially in larger amounts, women contribute more frequently and a greater number of women contribute on a regular basis than men. The authors suggested this was a matter of prestige and recognition. They indicate that these giving behaviors depict the male desire to be recognized for giving a gift, therefore increasing the likelihood that male donors will give larger amounts.

An existing sense of altruism and civic engagement is an additional predictor for alumni involvement (Hunter, Jones, & Boger, 1999; Weerts & Ronca, 2008). Weerts and Ronca (2008) found that alumni who volunteered at the university were also engaged as volunteers in other areas of their lives. Similarly, alumni of Livingstone College who were found to be donors were more likely to have served on a board of directors or committees as volunteers within their home communities (Hunter, Jones, & Boger, 1999).

In looking at characteristics of involved alumni, it is important to analyze the reasons alumni state they chose to not get involved. One reason many alumni choose not to give back to their alma mater is that they do not know a need exists (Taylor & Martin, 1995; Wastyn, 2009). These non-donors do not view their undergraduate experience in the same ways that donors do. As pointed out by Wastyn (2009) it is not so much the

demographic characteristics that are separating donors from non-donors, but rather their perceived view of the purpose and relationship they have with their institutions. These types of non-donors view the role of the college as a business-like relationship. They do not believe it is a charitable organization that needs financial or volunteer support, but their education is instead something that they have previously purchased and paid in full through tuition. “Instead of defining their student days as the beginning of a lifelong association with the college, non-donors in this study defined it as a ‘stop in their day’ or as a service for which they paid an agreed-upon price” (Wastyn, 2009, p. 103).

As financial status is an important factor in an alumnus’s decision regarding monetary donations, it can be translated that this is a reason that many become non-donors. A study conducted by Meer and Rosen (2012) found that alumni who received greater financial aid while pursuing their undergraduate degrees were less likely to become donors later on. This is reflected most specifically among students who received aid in the form of loans. Their chance of becoming alumni donors is greatly decreased. While students receiving scholarships donated smaller amounts, receipt of the scholarship as an undergraduate did not decrease the likeliness of their making a gift. Participation in a work-study job seemed to have no correlation to future alumni donations (Meer & Rosen, 2012).

When other factors are not a significant influence, the decision to be an involved alumnus or alumni is one based upon emotion and feelings of satisfaction with the undergraduate experience (Tsao & Coll, 2005; Weerts & Ronca, 2008). Palmer and Lewis (2008) found that emotions related to specific events effect alumni involvement. They specifically noted that a positive emotional response to the university’s

matriculation ceremony resulted in a positive correlation to alumni involvement in the future. The emotional response to this individual ceremony was found to be more statistically significant than the emotional response to the previous three year's experience and the emotional response evoked from the memory of those years (Palmer & Lewis, 2008).

Contradicting the idea that a positive association with the institution increases alumni engagement, Newman and Petrosko (2011) found higher satisfaction with the undergraduate experience and positive feelings towards the university had a negative correlation to alumni giving. However, even the researchers themselves were surprised by this result. They suggest one possible explanation for the negative correlation could be that the positive feelings towards their alma mater could cause the alumni to believe that their institution is in a good financial state where it does not need additional support from them (Newman and Petrosko, 2011).

In summary, common characteristics of alumni involvement include financial ability to make a monetary contribution, knowledge of the need for their assistance, a feeling of connection to the university, and positive perceptions of the undergraduate experience. These perceptions relate to their involvement as an undergraduate student and their perceptions of the success that involvement has helped them reach. One primary reason, aside from a lack of knowledge of need, as to why alumni choose not to get involved is they do not view it as a responsibility or part of their role as an alumnus or alumna of the university.

Job Attainment for Today's College Graduate

In noting the variables related to an alumnus or alumna's involvement with their undergraduate institutions, their financial abilities played a vital role in the decision to become involved. One factor, then, that is important to study is the job attainment and job market for today's college graduate. The rate of employability among college graduates differs based on many variables, whether it is their college major or even basic demographic information such as gender (Joy, 2003; Roksa & Levey, 2010).

For years studies have shown that those individuals with a college degree are able to have more financial success over a career than their counterparts who did not pursue higher education. The question then becomes, with the influx and increase of individuals aware of this disparity between the college-educated and non college-educated, can the labor force support the number of individuals choosing to obtain a degree (Barton, 2008)? With the unemployment rate of recent college graduates at 12.6 percent, the answer is seemingly no (Spreen, 2012), and unfortunately this trend is expected to continue to impact the current generation of recent college graduates as they age (Hobijn, Gardiner, & Wiles, 2011). There are more individuals with college degrees than there are available jobs for those individuals (Spreen, 2012). Barton (2008) indicated that the reason behind this overabundance of educated individuals versus available jobs could be caused by inaccurately reading into the statistics that state the need for college educated workers. "Here, a false conclusion about growing demand is reached by looking at occupations with the fastest growth rate, rather than looking at *all* occupations" (Barton, 2008, p. 18).

In analyzing which occupations relate to highest job attainment, college majors with a technical focus and the areas of education and health have fared better in terms of

employability as opposed to careers in the fields of communications and other liberal arts areas (Abel, Deitz, & Su, 2014). Roksa and Levey (2010) had similar results indicating that the more specifically related the undergraduate major is to a particular career, the higher employment rate at the entry-level. However, they noted that those whose college major had a low specificity to a career path would experience more career growth than their counterparts over time, but would struggle with the job market at the entry-level (Roksa & Levey, 2010).

While the majority of the research implied that choosing a vocation-specific major would result in a higher likelihood of job attainment, Abel, Dietz, and Su (2014) have noted that not every college-educated individual could be successful in every major. Individuals choose majors based on their talents and strengths and choosing a major due to its higher employment status would not be a good indicator of success for that specific individual in that specific field (Abel, Dietz, & Su, 2014). Borden and Rajecki (2000) conducted a study in which recent graduates of a psychology department were the participants. The full-time employment rate of this sample was 75%, which is above what is expected based on other research. However, the researchers noted the willingness of these graduates to take jobs outside of their direct field of study increased their likelihood of job attainment than if they had stuck solely to the field of psychology, which is often liberal arts in nature (Borden & Rajecki, 2000).

While studies show that the male unemployment rate as of 2011 was higher than that of their female counterparts—15.4 percent and 10.1 percent, respectively—males who are obtaining the available jobs are receiving a higher wage status than females (Spreen, 2013). Joy (2003) indicated that one variable influencing this could be women's

choice of career path leading to lower paying jobs. However, this disparity of pay rate was found to remain even when the individuals of different genders were in the same field of study and occupation and entered the job opportunity with the same qualifications and backgrounds (Roksa & Levey, 2010). This issue is a matter of the job market, and not within the qualifications of the candidates. Despite these conditions and differences by gender, women are more likely to have a greater satisfaction with their job and/or career path (Joy, 2003).

Barton (2008) argued for the growing need for college-educated individuals in our current economy, but Abel, Deitz, and Su (2014) countered with the question of whether or not this need places the recent graduates in “good” jobs. The trend is that recent college graduates who do obtain jobs tend to be either underpaid or underemployed (Hobijn, Gardiner, & Wiles, 2011). The phrase underemployed can be common in articulating the job status of today’s college graduate (Abel, Deitz, & Su, 2014). Underemployment is a frequently cited area of concern (Abel, Deitz, & Su, 2014; Barton, 2008), and research from earlier generations shows this is not a new trend for degree holding graduates. Alsalam (1993) addressed the issue of underemployment and defined it as “college graduates who are employed in occupations that traditionally do not employ workers with a 4-year college degree” (p. 51). At the time this study was conducted in 1993, the underemployment rate was 20 percent based on the sample population (Alsalam). Abel, Deitz, and Su (2014) noted the underemployment rates from the nineties were high, and believe that the current job market is causing this underemployment rate to grow even higher. According to their research, the underemployment rate reached 44 percent by 2012 (Abel, Deitz, & Su, 2014).

Abel, Deitz, and Su (2014) did note a difference in the underemployment by distinguishing between “good non-college jobs” and “low-wage jobs” (p. 5). The researchers indicated that these two levels of underemployment have existed even during the time of Alsalam’s (1993) study, but that the number of college graduates who fall into the low-wage jobs category had risen since 2000 (Abel, Deitz, & Su, 2014). This can cause issues both in the achievement and success levels of the college-educated and in the fact that these jobs are then taken away from individuals with lower education levels as someone with a higher degree status is ready and willing to take the job (Barton, 2008).

One explanation for this underemployment rate could be the fact that temporary employment and agencies have increased in recent years, which gives a greater exposure and access to that type of employment for graduates (Gainey, Barnett, Davis, & Curvino, 2003). Gainey, et. al. (2003) explained that temporary employment can be a primary source for college graduates to obtain permanent employment as many firms are now looking to this source of employment as the entry level into their companies. While in this case, the job attainment rates are not as low, the issue of underemployment is a factor in college graduates’ satisfaction with their work. The environment of temporary employment can be off putting to those new to this type of work. Participants in Gainey, et. al.’s (2003) study had a lower opinion of how they were treated by both the company and their co-workers if this was their first job as a temporary employee.

While there is an increase in this type of job attainment with college graduates working in low-wage, part-time, or temporary jobs, overall, they are still better off than their counterparts who did not obtain a college degree (Abel, Deitz, & Su, 2014). Alsalam (1993) pointed out that the issue of underemployment of college graduates would

continue if graduates fail to take into consideration the status of the job market when deciding to enter college. Employers would also need to reorganize work to accommodate the influx of college-educated individuals while paying attention to the market in order to balance out these affects. Combined, these two processes would be necessary for potential students to weigh the pros and cons of obtaining a college degree based on the possible outcomes they will see when entering the job market (Alsalam, 1993). Another outlet to avoid underemployment or unemployment has been the influx of college graduates choosing to go back to school to obtain an even higher-level degree. Twenty-five percent of 2011 graduates fall into this category (Spreen, 2013). While attainment of a graduate level degree does increase employability of candidates, it also reflects upon the difficulty of finding and obtaining a job with a bachelor's level degree (Roksa & Levey, 2010).

Suggestions to counter the issues of unemployment and underemployment faced by today's college graduate primarily start with the training and education provided by the university itself (Abel, Dietz, & Su, 2014; Borden & Rajecki, 2000; Harvey, 2005). Harvey (2005) indicated that this need is something universities are aware of and are actively working to accommodate. The abilities and skills developed through obtaining a college degree are those same skills that employers want, however, university initiatives that focus on this skill building are often federally funded, which can hurt those programs as the funding declines from year to year (Harvey, 2005). One way to combat this loss of program funding is for universities to create stronger direct ties and relationships with the employers and businesses who hire the graduates (Abel, Dietz, & Su, 2014). Increased

value and attention to undergraduate academic advising within individual departments can improve the future success of these students as well (Borden & Rajecki, 2000).

To summarize, the rate of unemployment amongst college graduates is high, especially when looking at the promise that a bachelor's degree has previously held. A reason for this high unemployment rate is a higher influx of college-educated individuals than the current job market can accommodate or support. This result differs based on both college major and gender. Results of this recession in job availability include the underemployment of many who take either temporary jobs or jobs which skill levels do not necessitate a college degree. Another resulting factor is an increase in graduate level study as a graduate degree does currently hold more promise for job attainment in the future. Universities can look to incorporate extra attention to preparing their students for the career world at the undergraduate level in an effort to combat these high unemployment rates.

The History of the University Career Services

Due to its influence on alumni involvement and career attainment, it is important to investigate the role of the university career services. The purpose of a campus career services is to provide students with the skills necessary to clarify their career goals and to conduct successful job searches (McGrath, 2002). "Access to employers does little good if students are not clear about their career interests and not prepared to initiate contact with employers" (McGrath, 2002, p. 82). The history of the career service begins with career placement services in the late 1800s all the way up to today's model of career counseling at the university level (Pope, 2000). Pope (2000) explained that the purpose of this initial model was to reduce levels of poverty through job placement. In the 1920s,

educational guidance moved into the lower level education systems and became a part of the collegiate world through the training and work of counselors between 1940 and 1959 (Pope, 2000). It was during these early stages that the development of a field for vocational and career advising began to emerge. The development of the GI Bill created further need for career counselors as a higher influx of students entered college (Schaub, 2012). Schaub (2012) explained how this was the “Placement Paradigm” age as the primary reason for the career services was to match students with jobs following graduation.

The emergence of career services at the collegiate level can be attributed in large part to one seemingly unrelated event—the USSR’s launching of Sputnik. This humbled Americans and made them consider that they were possibly not the world power in capitalism. The result was a push for career counseling in order to encourage students to pursue mathematical and scientific education majors in college (Pope, 2000). The National Vocational Guidance Association was created in the early 20th century and later renamed the National Career Development Association (NCDA) in 1985 (Herr, 2013). Around this time frame, the need for a set of standards was identified, and “The Unfinished Agenda” was published in 1984. In the agenda, the five areas of focus for career and vocational development were written as “(a) personal skills and attitudes, (b) communications and computational skills and technological literacy, (c) employability skills, (d) broad and specific occupational skills, and (e) knowledge and foundations for planning and lifetime learning” (Herr, 2013, p. 281). With these content areas set as the focus of career counseling, the profession encountered a shift from the “Placement Paradigm” to the “Planning Paradigm” as they worked to counsel and prepare students

for the career force, rather than simply match them with a job upon completion of a college degree (Schaub, 2012).

During the 1970s the ideologies of students began to change and therefore the need and use of the campus career services changed as well (Pope, 2000). Students began to place a greater focus and value on jobs that they viewed would change the world for the better (Pope, 2000), and university career service centers responded by personalizing the counseling experience (McGrath, 2002). From the 1990s to the present the focus of the career service has been on the transition from school into the workforce for students (Pope, 2000), and the vocation development goals as previously outlined by Herr (2013) have moved to the forefront in creating programs and initiatives to aid in this transition. Even in the past few decades career services has undergone significant change. At times, career service centers would charge a fee for students to establish their credentials file with the service or a fee just to use the career service office to aid the university in fundraising (McGrath, 2002). As time moved forward, universities found this to be a barrier to use of the service, so the fees were discontinued (McGrath, 2002). The 1990s and 2000s have shown a shifting of ideological focuses in the field. These decades brought the profession the “Networking Paradigm” and “Social Networking Paradigm” as the focus of the career service moved toward making connections between employers and students to create a global forum (Schaub, 2012).

In working to aid students, career counselors need tools to measure students’ interests and talents. It was through this need that interest inventories and career assessments were born (Harrington & Long, 2013). The first standardized inventory was the Carnegie Interest Inventory, created in 1920. This inventory expanded the amount of

survey questions career counselors could use to assess student's interests (Harrington & Long, 2013). There have been numerous interest inventories created since that time. The primary asset in career counseling is the relationship the counselor is able to establish with the student, but the use of tools such as these assessments helps career counselors to tailor their counseling sessions to the individual (Harrington & Long, 2013).

Additionally, today's career counselor will use technology frequently when working with students. Many of these assessments have been converted to online and many employers are utilizing online services for the application process (McGrath, 2002). Other advances that the career service has benefitted from due to technology are an increase in services available for students and a change in the way that networking occurs between students and alumni and students and employers. Now students can directly set up mock interviews and do them online with the use of a webcam; they can attend online career fairs, use online libraries of job openings, and hold interviews for jobs in far away places with the use of Skype (Schaub, 2012). Schaub (2012) noted that career counseling has evolved and opportunities are no longer afforded solely through the career service office. Networking opportunities and relationships are formed between employers and individuals through tools such as LinkedIn, and employers have directly formed relationships with student groups or academic departments (Schaub, 2012).

The Role of Career Services and Student Perceptions of its Resources

As indicated by the history of career services, career counseling centers can help students to build a network of potential employers and contacts in their future professions (Parker, 1996). Because employers are looking for specific types of candidates when reaching out to a career service center, better relationships with student organizations and

academic departments can assist career services with targeting qualified students whose talents will be relevant to the opportunities presented by employers (Schaub, 2012). Other beneficial offerings of the career service include: job fairs, mock interviews, shadowing opportunities within a student's career field of interest, and assistance with resume creation (McGrath, 2002).

Fouad, et. al. (2006) indicated through their research that students were feeling mental distress over their need to make career decisions, yet they still were not utilizing the services offered through career services. The career decision process often causes distress, anxiety, and even depression in students (Schaub, 2012). Career counselors can assist students with these issues to the extent to which it pertains to the career search process and does not go beyond their level of training. In response to this, career service centers have formed strong relationships with the campus counseling centers to make proper referrals that will ensure the student is receiving assistance for any mental health conditions related to their career stress (Schaub, 2012).

Career counseling is necessary for students to be successful in achieving their career goals and to reduce the feelings of anxiety and other mental health concerns associated with career concerns, yet there is a public and personal stigma attached to utilizing these services (Ludwikowski, Vogel, & Armstrong, 2009; Fouad, Guillen, Harris-Hodge, Henry, Novakovic, Terry, & Kentamneni, 2006). As the programs offered by career centers can be instrumental in assuring that students are successful in their job attainment, it is important that universities work to reduce negative stigma and increase utilization of these services (Ludwikowski, Vogel, & Armstrong, 2009). For first-generation or under represented populations, the career services may be a resource that

either they are unaware of due to their first-generation status, or has not been promoted to them by family members who have attended college because those family members did not utilize the service themselves (Parker, 1996). In a study conducted by Fouad, et. al. (2006), only 50 percent of the sample population were aware of career service programs available on campus and even fewer were utilizing them. The highest utilized service was job postings, and only 15 percent of the students were utilizing this service. Sixty-four percent of students expressed that they were comfortable with seeking help through career services, yet they were not utilizing it (Fouad, et. al., 2006).

Fouad, et. al. (2006) found that students did not utilize career services primarily because they were unclear as to how the process worked or they utilized other individuals to assist them with career needs. Ludiwowski, Vogel, and Armstrong (2009) found, however, that outside individuals were increasing the stigma students associated with career services, which affected women's decisions to seek career assistance more than it did for men. Men would experience a greater personal stigma, but they also believed that they would obtain more value from seeking career counseling than women did (Ludiwowski, Vogel, & Armstrong, 2009). It is important to reduce negative stigma associated with career service use. Making strides to change the perception of career service usefulness to increase its value in the minds of students will increase usage of career service centers (Ludiwowski, Vogel, & Armstrong, 2009). Fouad, et. al. (2006) stated that more important than putting efforts into decreasing the stigma is increasing awareness of services offered. Then, as Ludiwowski, Vogel, & Armstrong (2009) pointed out, the value of career services use will begin to outweigh any negative stigma.

Career counseling and university career service centers provides students with resources to obtain their career goals through individual based goal setting and interviewing, networking access to future employers for jobs and internships, interview practice, and resume and cover letter assistance. The career search and related processes can cause anxiety and distress for many students, but the assistance provided by career services can help to lessen these feelings. There is a stigma attached to the use of career service center, but it has been found to differ between genders and how much the stigma affects each gender.

Altruism and Social Exchange Theories

While there is limited research describing the relationship between theory and alumni engagement, two theories could be utilized to describe the behaviors of alumni who choose to engage with their undergraduate institutions. The first of these is the theory of altruism. Altruism is “a willingness to act in consideration of the interests of other persons, without the need of ulterior motives” (Nagel, 1970, p. 79). Utilizing this definition as a foundation, the theory of altruism serves as an explanation for the alumni who choose to give, expecting nothing in return, nor doing so because they believe they are indebted in any way to the institution. They give solely to help others (Hunter, Jones, & Boger, 1999; Weerts & Ronca, 2008). Weerts and Ronca (2008) further support this theoretical backing through their finding that alumni who are current donors to other organizations have a higher likelihood of philanthropic giving to their college or university. These are the people that give just to give.

On the reverse of this is the social exchange theory. This theory is also relevant to an alumni base as not all alumni give without ulterior motive. In the context of alumni

involvement, social exchange theory is utilized when the alumnus or alumna weighs the cost of either volunteering or donating financially versus their perceptions of benefits they received from the institution while an undergraduate student, or their thoughts on what benefits they will receive in the future by engaging with the institution. This cost/benefit analysis will not only focus on the direct and tangible benefits of the degree, but also on perceptions based on quality of experiences (Weerts & Ronca, 2008).

Summary

There are many factors and variables to consider when discussing an alumnus's or alumna's decision to remain involved in their alma mater. Previous research places a strong emphasis on financial and professional success and the viewpoint of the alumni on whether their undergraduate experiences were positive or negative. Research also illustrates the role of active efforts to engage alumni in ways that are meaningful to them, and to provide resources, such as an active and successful career service center, to them while they are undergraduates to better increase their involvement as alumni.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative approach for data collection and data analysis. Interviews were conducted to allow alumni participants in the study to respond and provide the researcher with information regarding their involvement and their background relationship with the institution.

Design of the Study

The study was conducted through five individual interviews between the participant and the researcher that lasted 30 to 45 minutes each. The purpose of the interviews was to allow alumni to describe their involvement with their undergraduate institutions. The interviews also allowed the participants to describe their levels of satisfaction and success within their jobs and talk about any contributions their visits to the career service center played in that success and satisfaction. The value of qualitative research lies in the ability to develop meaning and understand the perceptions and views of the participants, allowing them to utilize their own words. This allowed for the researcher to extract meaning and gain further insight into the experiences of the participants (Yin, 2011).

Participants

Participants in this study were five alumni of a mid-sized Midwestern comprehensive university. Participants were selected from alumni who have graduated within the past five years, in an effort to eliminate outlying variables related to being in the workforce longer. This also helped to ensure that most participants received the same opportunities from career services while pursuing their undergraduate degrees. A

purposeful sampling was selected by choosing participants from recommendations received by professional staff and alumni of the institution.

Participant 1: Meredith is a 24-year-old white female alumna who majored in music education at the institution. She is a 2012 graduate who currently works as a 7th and 8th grade music director and chorus teacher. Her undergraduate involvement included being a member of the Honors College and participation in choral performance groups.

Meredith never lived on campus as an undergraduate as she commuted from her nearby hometown her first year and lived off campus with friends in the years following.

Participant 2: Chad is a 24-year-old white male alumnus who graduated in 2013. While at the institution he majored in science with a teacher certification in biology. Chad currently serves as a high school science teacher. He teaches biology, environmental science, and astronomy to students in grades 9 to 12. He was involved in many organizations as an undergraduate student. These included: membership and leadership roles within a fraternity, multiple leadership roles within the New Student Programs department, Education Scholars, and Botany Club. He worked at the library, the New Student Programs office, front desk of a residence hall, and the Foreign Language Lab.

Participant 3: Sean is a 27-year old white male alumnus who graduated in 2014. He majored in health studies with a health administration focus and minored in business administration. Sean works as a medical home facilitator for an area hospital. Sean did not participate in any activities at the institution, but he worked off campus during his time as a student. Sean was a commuter student throughout his time at the institution.

Participant 4: Lucy is a 22-year-old white female alumna who majored in communication studies and minored in studio art. She graduated in 2013 and currently

works as a community relations representative for a dental healthcare company. Lucy was very involved as an undergraduate student at the institution. She was a member of a service sorority with which she participated in more than 20 hours of community service per semester. She was involved as a staff member for New Student Programs, was on the University [programming] Board, was a member of the Public Relations Student Society of America, and an honorary fraternity for the communication studies department. In addition to this involvement, Lucy worked for the fine arts center in the box office and as a house manager for shows at different points in her undergraduate career and also worked in one of the campus dining centers.

Participant 5: Sam is a 24-year-old white male alumnus who graduated in 2013. He majored in mass communications with an emphasis in broadcasting while at the institution. Sam currently holds two jobs. One is as a sales associate at a home and hardware store; the other is a part-time position as an on-air DJ for a radio station. Sam was heavily involved with the on-campus radio station and his fraternity while at the institution. He also participated in activities related to the on-campus television channel and the Society of College Journalists.

Research Site

The research site is a mid-sized Midwestern university with an enrollment of approximately 10,000 students. Individual interviews took place in a location that was convenient for the participating alumnus or alumna. Four of the interviews were held in the institutions student center with the fifth being held at the place of employment of the participant. Each interview was recorded with a video camera and an audio recording device and lasted between 30 to 45 minutes.

Instruments

Five individual interviews were conducted for this study. Demographic information including age, gender, race, and current employment status was collected. Closed-ended questions were utilized to study knowledge and usage of available services (e.g. “Did you ever attend a resume or other workshop hosted by the career services?” and “Did you ever schedule and attend an appointment to meet with a career counselor at the career services?”). Open-ended questions were prepared in advance of the interview and any additional questions prompted by participant responses were also included. Interview protocol (see Appendix B) was developed based on the research questions. The interviews were recorded on video and using a voice recorder so that the researcher could transcribe the conversations.

Data Collection

Individual interviews were conducted during the fall of 2014. The interviews were videotaped and audio recorded and later transcribed by the researcher. The researcher allowed all participants to read through transcriptions of their interviews to verify content and understanding of the researcher. The researcher then coded the data to identify themes.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data gathered through this study, the researcher utilized the five-phase analysis process as described by Yin (2011). For the compiling stage of the process, the researcher took fragmented excerpts from the transcribed interviews to begin creating the database for this study. As the researcher moved to phase two, disassembling, she coded the data herself and had a colleague code the data to identify

themes among the participants in the areas of alumni involvement, job success and satisfaction, and the role of the university in reaching that success. During phase three of analysis, reassembling, the researcher placed the coded data into organized lists based on theme. Phase four was interpreting of data where the researcher used the “reassembled material to create a new narrative” (Yin, 2011, p. 179). The researcher utilized the interpreted data to create conclusions or findings based on the participants’ words (Yin, 2011).

CHAPTER IV

Findings

The purpose of this study was to investigate the contextual conditions related to alumni involvement with their undergraduate institutions. A secondary purpose was to investigate the patterns and means of engagement between alumni and career service centers. This chapter presents emergent themes related to the five research questions, which aided in the purpose of this study. These themes emerged through analysis of interviews conducted with five alumni of the institution. The participants had varying levels of engagement both as undergraduates and as alumni, and represented different career paths. The research questions are presented with themes that emerged through these interviews.

Research Question 1: What is the context of the participant's experience as an undergraduate?**Undergraduate Experience**

The first theme that emerged was the context through which the participants viewed their undergraduate experiences. This resulted in sub-themes that relate to specific areas of this experience, which stood out throughout the interviews.

Extra-Curricular Involvement

The participants had varying levels of extra-curricular involvement that made up their undergraduate experiences. Chad and Lucy were the most similar in this area as both have diverse, heavy levels of extra-curricular participation. Chad was a member of a fraternity and held the role of social chair within it. He cites this along with his work with the New Student Programs (orientation) office as his most heavy involvement. Chad

acknowledged the benefits of his extra-curricular involvement and the resulting networking when saying:

There were a lot of people involved with orientation that were also involved with that fraternity. We were all in it together. We would help each other get positions within orientation because that was a really big focus. There were a lot of us.

Lucy's involvement shadowed this as she too cited her work with New Student Programs as playing a heavy influence: "That was probably one of the biggest instances that I felt like, 'Yeah. This is my school, and I want to do something to be a part of it.'" For Lucy, extra-curricular activities were a chance to share her love of the institution and help to grow that love in other students: "It was important for me to help get more things going on campus for students to do and get involved in." She reinforced her point by stating:

I'm a big advocate of [the institution]. I love [the institution]. I didn't really feel that way until I started with New Student Programs, and I learned so much more about the school. I just wanted to be involved, and I wanted other people to know how much I loved it. I wanted them to love it too. My own passion for the school made me want to do more for the school, made me want to be more involved with my university.

Meredith's undergraduate involvement differed from Chad and Lucy in that it focused specifically on ensembles that she participated in as part of her music education major. When discussing her most vivid memories of her time at the institution, she said:

They would probably all have to do with music events. That was what we looked forward to. We looked forward to preparing for those concerts and to any kind of trips that we took. We would take small tour trips out of town. We'd perform at

different locations: churches, schools, etc. Those are what stand out to me probably the most.

Sam's involvement was similar to Meredith's in that he focused most of his attention on extra-curricular activities that were closely related to the career he wanted to have: "They always said, 'Get as much under your hat as you can,' and I tried to pretty much do everything. I think I did." He spent a large portion of his time working for the radio and television stations on campus, specifically in the area of sports, which helped him in making connections that would lead to future career opportunities. Chad reinforced Sam's statement in showing that extra-curricular involvement was important to help him build the skills he most needed in the future:

The positions were cool, but it was good experience more so than anything.

Actually having a position isn't something that I've ever found super important.

I'm more focused on building personal experiences and abilities. It wasn't really the idea of having the position, but what I could get out of that position that was more important.

Academic Fit

For many participants, the key to their undergraduate experiences was in finding the right fit on campus in terms of their majors. For Sean, this was found through the assistance of the transfer relations coordinator on campus:

It all started when I was working for [an agriculturally focused company]. I didn't really like my job there. I was a business administration major transfer from [an area community college]. I had met with one of the transfer coordinators from [the institution], and I knew I wanted to do something in healthcare, but I was a

very business-minded person. She brought up health administration to me, and right then it just clicked. I was a little worried about going back to school after I had already started a different career. Although it was pretty demanding and rigorous, I really appreciate all of the work that was given and all of the help I received from the health studies department.

The assistance of the transfer staff in choosing the right major was instrumental in Sean's success as someone who had previously not felt very confident as a student: "I was never one to do really well in school, but I never did so well in school in my life as when I started with the health studies program."

Sam's experience also shows how finding the right fit within a major can aid in a positive experience at the institution:

I came to [the institution] in 2008. I was originally a biology major, and I wanted to work in a zoo. That didn't really work out because math is hard, and the biology department is hard when you come in as a freshman...so, I switched my major to communications my second semester my freshman year, and never looked back, I guess.

As indicated by Sam's involvement and the great opportunities he was granted within the radio field, his statement shows the importance of this switch early on in his academic career. Lucy echoed this experience with the struggle to find the right fit as an entering freshman student: "I started out at [the institution] as an art education major and decided that wasn't for me...I switched to graphic design, and that wasn't for me either. I was stuck, and I needed some advice on where to go." In Lucy's case, she turned to career services on campus to aid her in finding the perfect fit within her major.

Sense of Community

Regardless of their undergraduate extra-curricular involvement or their ease in finding a major that fit their aspirations, all of these alumni related back to the feeling of a community or family they found at the institution. Lucy summed up this experience well in saying: “I think making friends within those organizations definitely helped make me want to stick with them, but I also just had a lot of fun with them. I felt like I was a part of something.” Sam’s experiences reinforced this thought through his radio involvement. He referred to his old radio classmates fondly and was able to quickly share where they ended up. It was clear through his interview that they created a family unit and looked to help one another out through their experiences and connections.

While Sean admitted that he could likely count the number of times he was in the institution’s student union on one hand, he acknowledged that his lasting friendships came from the connections he made with individuals within his major:

Some of my best friends that I have I met while at [the institution], and I don’t know if we became friends because we were both in the same program...and were like-minded individuals. I think all of the friends that I still keep in contact with were relationships that I built while at [the institution].

Sean goes on to share that these relationships extended further than just within friendships. He also has lasting connections with faculty from within his department: “I just had a professor text me yesterday. She was upset that I didn’t tell her that I got this job here and that I was back in the area. I don’t know if it was just the health studies department or what it was, but they cared.”

Chad shared how his experience with the New Student Programs office helped him to establish a core group of friends on campus: “There was a group of us that came in as [orientation] leaders, and then we did the next four positions [within that office] all together. We kind of went through it as a group. We were a family sort of.” Meredith had a similar experience in finding a pseudo-family through the small feel of her music program:

The music department itself was like a small family because it was a small department. It was really comforting. I came from a small community, and I was able to get still that same idea in my department. Even at the college level, it was a comfortable place to be. I really enjoyed it.

She shared how her acapella group had the chance to perform a concert at her home church: “My music family got to see my home family, so it was kind of like my two worlds got to meet.”

While the feeling of community was a great connector for all of these alumni in establishing their identities on campus, Lucy noted that it is this sense of community that made it a difficult adjustment to transition from student to alumna:

It was hard, and it still is hard. [The institution] is just its own little bubble almost. You get so caught up in “this is my community, these are my people, this is how I live my life every single day.” You get so used to having this support system around you. You have people that feel the same way as you do about the school, what you’re involved in, and what you’re doing. Leaving that and transitioning into the “real world” is hard. I definitely miss having that piece of my life, and I miss feeling like I’m doing something that I care about.

Research Question 2: What were the interactions and engagements between the participant and career services during the undergraduate experience?

Engagement with Career Services

Alumni interviewed for this study shared their interactions and contact made with the career services. The following emerged themes will illuminate the type of relationships created with this center at the institution.

Resume Guidance

Meredith found that career services was a great place to gain clarification on expectations for her resume. She realized that resumes cannot just be exactly the same across majors, and found career services to be great in illuminating what the actual expectations were within her field of study:

I would kind of get mixed reviews that educators were looking for a certain kind of perspective on your resume whereas a medical professional is looking for something different. So, I wanted to get more of an objective point of view from somebody in career services.

Chad's experience differed from Meredith's. While he did utilize career services for resume assistance, he was not convinced of their helpfulness to him: "I used [career services] for resume building a few times. Sometimes the help that I got was really good; sometimes it was really vague...That didn't help. So I just kind of went on to do my own thing." As Chad did not find the suggestions for his resume to be very clear, he utilized other campus professionals to assist with this aspect of his career development, such as advisors and graduate student friends. As Chad reflected back on his undergraduate experience throughout the interview, he gave career services credit in aiding him to get

started with his resume, although he found their advice vague as he advanced within his undergraduate career. He laughs as he recalls going to career services for assistance in creating application materials for his roles in the New Student Programs office: “You needed a cover letter and a resume and things like that, and I didn’t know what that was.” Sean echoed Chad’s original sentiment that he did not find a great deal of help from career services: “Once I was building a resume, and to be totally honest I thought that was a joke.” When asked for clarification on what was a joke, Sean shared:

The advice that they gave me [was a joke]. I walked in, and I met with a lady whose name I don’t remember. She sat down, and did the resume for me. She didn’t tell me why she was putting the things on there that she was. She just said, “Do it like this.” She saved it on my flash drive and off I went. It wasn’t really a resume teaching or anything like that. It was just more of, “here we’re going to come in and do your resume and then off you go.” I was not really impressed by that.

Like other participants, Lucy and Sam both utilized career services for resume assistance and guidance, but did not have much to note regarding their experiences with this aspect of career development. Sam said: “My interactions were very, very minimal. [A staff member] came to classes and said ‘this is what your resumes should look like; and that was pretty much the extent of my involvement.”

Career Services Events

Meredith talked of attending multiple career fairs while at the institution. She shared that it was a requirement of her academic department to attend these events

beginning as a freshman to start practicing for later career fairs where she would actually be looking for positions:

So it seemed kind of silly that the freshmen were going because obviously they weren't going to hire us. But looking back now, I value that I didn't go into my first job fair looking for a job. So I really value getting that training wheel experience.

Chad, too, attended multiple career fairs as part of his teaching program requirements. One thing he noted from these events was that the diversity of employers varied greatly from year to year, which could limit opportunities for students. Sam spoke briefly on his attendance at a career fair. He attended one specifically for broadcasting and was able to establish a connection with an employer that led to an internship position.

Although Sean's experience with resume assistance did not create a level of value for him with career services, he shared how interesting and relevant event topics drew him back in to wanting to utilize their help:

Well, I guess I had two more interactions. [Career services was] having a seminar on using LinkedIn. I was getting ready to graduate, and thought: "It's time to network; it's healthcare. So, I went to that..."[The career services counselor] put on a great presentation and was very knowledgeable on the subject. She told us the dos and don'ts, and she was very blunt and very clear. It was awesome. I actually took her up on her offer. She had said, "Make an appointment, and I'll come in and help you." So I did. That was really good.

Established Relationships

The creation of relationships, whether pre-existing or newly formed through interactions, greatly assisted in the type of value participants placed on their experiences and interactions. Meredith placed a great deal of value on the advice given to her from career services. Her statements reflect a sense of connection and trust with the staff in their knowledge:

It was nice to hear from somebody that worked in career services. She had been a music major and she was a friend of my mom's. I knew she came from the same background as I did, so I valued her opinion on that. Then I also valued it from the perspective that she was in the workforce. She didn't stay in education. So she had that other perspective to offer too.

Although Chad found his experience with professional staff at the career services to be "vague," he, too, found a connection with staff that he could trust in asking for advice. Chad continued to utilize their services in an unofficial capacity through friends that worked there: "I had some graduate assistant friends that worked there. Since we were close, they would have time to meet with me outside of work time to go over things."

While Lucy did not have a pre-existing relationship with career services before entering the institution, the assistance she gained from the center created a relationship of trust that would encourage Lucy to return for help throughout her undergraduate career. She described how a professional at the career services was her first point of contact in helping her to decide on her major: "[A career services professional], I think, was one of the first people I talked to, and she sat down with me and did the career aptitude and personality tests." Lucy also utilized career services when searching for an internship.

She credited them for pointing her in the right direction in obtaining her summer internship. Because she valued this guidance, Lucy wanted others to experience that sort of assistance from professionals at the institution. In reflecting on her interactions with staff at career services, Lucy shared: “I was really grateful for it. I encouraged a lot of people to go to them after I went. I had a lot of friends that also didn’t know what they were doing with their lives, so I felt like they helped me out a lot.”

Sam had minimal interactions and experiences to share regarding assistance received from career services. He did note, however, that this was in his opinion due to the type of hiring environment surrounding the radio occupation:

I don’t know what the university could do because of the type of industry that it is. It’s not the same as a normal business...[Employees] have to have certain skills that the boss likes...your personality matters a lot. If you’re a weird dude or a weird girl, you’re not going to get hired in radio because if you’re weird they’re not going to put you on the air. There’s a lot of outside things that the university can’t control. That’s just the way it is.

Research Question 3: What are the opinions and feelings of the participant in terms of his or her job attainment?

Career Preparation

Participants shared their feelings on their current job attainment and satisfaction with that status. Throughout their conversations on this topic, they reflected upon their internship experiences, the assistance that campus connections played in their current experiences, and their feelings of preparedness afforded to them both by the institution and individual academic departments.

Internships and Hands-On Experiences

The alumni interviewed in this study all participated in either an internship or student teaching experience while undergraduates. Sam placed a high level of value in his experience and noted it as an asset in creating connections to advance within his career. When asked where he thought his most assistance would come from when moving forward, he stated: “My past internships, really, because [the institution’s] broadcast program in general is pretty new.” While Sam viewed his internship experiences as an asset in advancing his career, he credited the institution with aiding him in his ability to obtain the internships to begin with: “Everyone that I’ve ever talked to has said, ‘Your resume is great,’ which I can only attest to the experiences that [the institution] gave me.” Sean’s career path echoed Sam’s opinion on his internship experience and its value. Sean received his internship through a connection made at the institution:

A friend from [the institution’s] mother is actually the administrator [at my internship site]. I was trying to find things around here, but she had said, “Hey, if you ever need help, let me know.” I wasn’t finding anything I wanted around here. I pulled my “who ya know” card, and it was flawless. That internship is actually how I got my last job.

Chad reiterated the point that connections made during hands-on undergraduate experiences, such as his observation experience, can lead to career opportunities: “The guy I replaced just recently retired. When I was observing, another teacher mentioned that in a few years that teacher would be retiring. So from there, I just kept with it.” This led to Chad obtaining his current teaching position. Meredith had a similar experience as Chad in gaining her current position. While participating in her practicum, Meredith

worked with the teacher she would go on to replace. This teacher and the connection she made with her helped her to receive the job offer following interviews:

[The school] told her they wanted her to have the final word on the best candidate. So they actually let her kind of make the decision. They obviously had to approve who made the final few cuts. I think maybe 50 people applied. She said, “You would be great for this.” She gave me the stamp of approval, and I couldn’t believe it. I never felt like she liked me. She was so stern and angry looking all of the time. She said that she thought I had what it took to do that job.

Meredith expressed her luck and gratitude in her student teaching placement, which ended up being a connection that would help her find her footing within her career:

At some schools, you actually have to go seek your placement yourself. So I’m grateful that I did not have to do that. I think that would be very stressful, and I wouldn’t even know where to start. I just kind of take it as a leap of faith that somebody here is going to place me with whomever I’m meant to be with, whomever I’m supposed to learn from.

She goes on to share that her cooperating teacher who supervised her during this experience was extremely impactful on her decision to continue on with teaching:

We still talk to this day. We still keep in touch. I am very, very thankful that we had that relationship. She actually helped me with my resume as well, and with the interview process she actually knew the principal of my school. She had a connection with him. So she helped me out with that and put in a good word for me. I was at the point where I didn’t know if I really wanted to go on with teaching, and she helped me see what it could be and what I could make of it. I

owe a lot to her, and I know I wouldn't be where I am today without her. I probably would have sought another career. I just wasn't sure of myself. She really helped me to see what was possible.

Sense of Preparedness

The alumni participants had varied views of their preparedness for their careers, both in terms of mental preparedness and skill aptitude to accomplish their job tasks. As noted earlier, Lucy struggled with the transition from student to alumna due to the great connections she had built on campus: "Leaving that and transitioning into the 'real world' is hard." However, she did find that assistance from campus staff aided in her transition. When asked how she felt the institution aided in her career success, she responded: "A lot actually. I really did confide in a lot of my advisors and even my professors, too." She feels as though she was adequately prepared to take on her role within her current workplace: "My skill levels match the job itself. So the things that I'm doing are definitely what I went to school for and what my major is in." She also noted that the faculty are instrumental in helping her prepare to return to school for her master's degree, which she plans to do in the next year: "[A professor] was kind of my big push toward wanting to go back and believing in myself that I could go back. Having him say that I was smart enough to go back made me think that maybe I should do this."

Chad shared his struggles with adjusting to teaching full time due to not having been adequately prepared while a student to balance the preparation for multiple classes along with actually teaching them. Chad has three "prep" classes, meaning he must create and learn all materials for those courses in order to be able to adequately teach them to his students.

That's one thing that those of us who graduated from the education department talk about a lot. Some of our classes were really useful. We understand the point of having to take classes such as Philosophy of Education to an extent, but a lot of us think that we need more clinical experience before graduating. For secondary education, we have our practicum and then student teaching, and that's it. That's all you have. You don't get any other exposure unless you go out and find it...So to an extent, yeah the department at [the institution] does prepare you. My content classes were great; I loved those. When it comes to the education classes though, I really enjoyed taking them because I love learning. But in terms of feeling that they actually prepared me for when I walked into a classroom? No. Not as much. It's good to know pedagogy and principles, but sometimes it can be hard to actually apply those things when you get into a real life situation.

Chad did state that he is an unusual case, though. He noted that most first year teachers only have one "prep" class as opposed to three. He also talked about how he spent his summers teaching at a local nature center where he had to create the content for his lessons, giving him experience that he believes the program lacked. Sean's experience with preparedness was exactly opposite of Chad's. He felt fully prepared for his career and has nothing but great things to say about his undergraduate academic department: "I honestly don't think I could have asked for a better educational experience."

For Meredith, if anything, she feels over prepared for the current job she is holding as she can only teach her students so much of what she knows:

I like what I do. I just feel like I don't use a lot of my undergraduate experience anymore. I kind of use it up to a certain level, but the higher level musicianship, I

don't get to use because they are thirteen or fourteen years old. I can't expect them to understand all of these terms that I didn't even learn until college. I kind of crave thinking about that stuff and being stimulated in that kind of fashion like I was when I was a student.

Career Satisfaction

The participants represented diverse opinions in terms of their current satisfaction with their careers. While Meredith was not unsatisfied, she was beginning to question what more could she do since she can only utilize a base level of knowledge when teaching her young students: "I just wonder what more can I be doing? What more can I challenge myself with?" Meredith is contemplating going back to school for a higher level degree, but is still undecided on her path due to other life circumstances:

I'm kind of at this crossroads of the fact that my boyfriend is going to graduate next year and go on to grad school. I'm planning to stay here. We're not really sure what's going to happen in the next couple of years so we're just kind of going with the flow right now. I have nothing to complain about right now. I don't see myself leaving for any reason related to being unhappy at my school. It would be related to some other kind of life circumstance.

Sam expressed similar ideas as Meredith in terms of his career. While he is content, he is also looking to move forward to something different:

My overall plan is to not be here more than 5 years. I've already been here a year in October, so four more, because where I'm at is a death trap really. People get stuck at a station like this because it's comfortable. [This community] is a nice area to live. The radio station is really laid back. You can almost do whatever you

want and get away with it, but I have bigger aspirations of being in a big city or a big town and having my own show every Monday to Friday, an afternoon drive or a morning show in a big market. That's what I want to do.

Chad demonstrated a great level of perseverance in his career, and stated positive feelings toward his current career, while still acknowledging the challenges found there:

I'm used to being busy and having a lot to do, but it is nowhere near the amount that this is. I like it. It's a lot of fun. It's really great because I get a lot of positive interactions, and my students really like me, which is good. It's a very healthy atmosphere. It's just that the workload is astronomically high.

Lucy demonstrated the highest level of discontent within her current career: When asked about her experience in her current position, she responded:

To be completely honest, I don't feel very good about it. First of all, I never thought I would do something for the dental industry. That was never, ever on my radar. This job came up because of a professor who told a student, who then told me about it...I guess what I'm doing it for isn't necessarily something that I'm passionate about. It's kind of draining. Also the environment that I'm in is draining. I sit in a cubicle all day long from 8 to 5. Being stuck in that and not having the routine at school that I was used to is hard. I went from being all over the place with classes and meetings to going to sitting at a desk for 8 hours every single day, 5 days a week.

Lucy is currently in the process of applying to graduate schools. She would like to earn a master's degree and possibly a PhD to become a professor. "I want to stick with the same

field but stay in academia instead of being in the corporate world. I just want to stay in school forever.”

As opposed to the uncertainty felt by some of the other participants, Sean is very happy with where he is currently in his career. He recently started a new job closer to home, and he has found the company to be an excellent fit for him:

I love it. This is actually what I wanted to do. I thought that my last job was going to be a little bit more like this, but it didn’t turn out the way that I wanted it to.

The company I worked for didn’t really have the structure I like, whereas at [my current company], they mean business, and I love it!

Research Question 4: In what ways are participants involved with their undergraduate institution?

Methods of Giving

The fourth emergent theme related to volunteerism and contributions to the undergraduate institution. None of the participants directly identified ways in which they give back to the institution as a whole, however through the following sub-headings, their involvement with varying areas across the institutional structure depict a sense of giving back to their alma mater. All participants have had some form of interaction and involvement with either their undergraduate academic department or an area of extra-curricular involvement on campus since their graduation. Chad summed up the experiences of all of the participants in terms of alumni involvement when he said: “I don’t know how other people look at it, but for me the major impact was with the individual groups of people that I worked with. I guess in terms of giving back to the University itself, I work with specific groups still.”

Extra-Curricular Volunteerism

Sam shared the importance of giving back to specific groups, and views this contribution as ultimately benefitting the institution: “Right now I’m an advisor, so I’m giving back to the fraternity that helped me through everything, and by giving back to the fraternity, the fraternity can then give back to the university.” Chad, too, advises his undergraduate fraternity and talked of the importance of creating relationships with the students:

It has been interesting to balance that level of authority with also being sure that you’re developing relationships. You’ve got to find a balance between the two.

It’s been really cool, though. The group that I advise on campus, the fraternity, is doing really good.

Meredith has tried to make herself available to assist some of the areas of her extracurricular involvement, as well: “I have participated at a couple of music educator meetings where students meet to talk about music education issues and the future of music education.”

While Lucy hasn’t currently been given the opportunity, she has expressed a desire to give back to some of the organizations she was involved in as a student. She noted ways that alumni contributed when she was an undergraduate and how she could see herself becoming involved in a similar way:

We did have alumni skype in with us through [public relations student organization] to talk about what they did after graduation: how they got to where they are now, and what steps they took when applying. I would do something like that—just talking about how I got here, the things I do at my job, what to

expect in an actual job. If I go back to school, I could talk on what it takes to go back to grad school. I would be totally willing to speak to students on either of those now.

Professors and Academic Departments

Meredith has had multiple opportunities to continue to interact with the music department through her role as a 7th and 8th grade choir teacher: “The involvement that I have is more with my past professors. The kids that I have in class are going to sing in a concert with them next week. We get invited to do things like that.” Meredith is able to assist the university while simultaneously aiding her current job through events such as joint concerts between her students and the collegiate choirs. She viewed these as a “win-win” situation. She has also been involved with her undergraduate department through panels: “I was part of a new teacher panel as part of a conference they hosted...I definitely try to make myself available for things like that.” She also shared her interest in continued involvement with the department in a more hands-on way in the future: “I am absolutely open to hosting practicum students or student teachers.” While Sean has not previously had any involvement with the institution, he does have some planned involvement with his department in the works: “I’m actually going to be part of the alumni panel for [the department’s] accreditation site survey on Monday.”

Chad is very involved with both the science department and individual professors, including frequently housesitting for one of the professors. Chad shared how he continues to have important conversations that will aid the school by keeping in touch with these former faculty mentors:

I talk with [a faculty member] quite a bit because he is the one who met me as a freshman and guided me through education as a whole. I don't do as much with the education department as a whole with helping them, but I do more with my core content area. So, typically, it's the people that provided advice and guidance that I still try to keep in contact with.

He also shared his plans to increase his direct involvement with his academic department:

I work with one of my professors who is in charge of all of the undergraduate science education majors. So we're trying to brainstorm ways to get her methods class students or those taking independent study into my classroom to gain more hands on experience.

Research Question 5: What elements affect the participant's decision to engage with the university?

The final theme that emerged related to the elements that contribute to the alumnus or alumna's decision to become involved with the institution. The specific areas that affect this decision are illuminated in further depth.

Elements of Involvement

Financial Contribution

None of the alumni participants give back to the institution financially. In addition, they are not members of the alumni association. Lucy was the only possible contradiction to this as she may have won a free year membership with the alumni association during her senior year when she was recognized as one of 25 outstanding seniors, but she could not recall for sure:

I received an award from the Alumni Association, and I feel like part of that was a

free membership. To be honest, I haven't heard anything from the Alumni Association since then. I think maybe I've seen a couple of email communications, but other than that, I haven't seen a whole lot.

Aside from this lack of current donative giving, the participants mostly agree that they would like to give back financially at some point, just not now. When asked if he has given back financially to the institution to date, Sean responded: "Oh, no. Not until my loans are paid off. I'm still paying for the education I got from them." He went on to share that he would like to give back sometime in the future, but not now. He added, however, that if the health studies department were to ask for a financial donation currently, he would try to give to them now: "Oh, it's your home. It's like if I asked you for ten dollars right now or your friend asked you for ten dollars right now. It's that kind of comparison." For Sean, the difference was the established relationship, but he did later state: "I don't want to say I don't have school spirit. So many years from now if I had this big salary, and I could afford to have some disposable donation income, I would think that I would give it back." Like Sean, Sam, too, noted that he would like to give back financially because of his experiences, but he did not limit it specifically to a department or area: "I really enjoyed my time here, and I really appreciate everything the university did for me, so I'd like to give back eventually. It's just a matter of being able to give back eventually."

Meredith noted that she would definitely want to donate in the future because she sees the need, places high value in her experience, and has seen alumni giving modeled through her mother's involvement:

My mom went to [the institution], and I know that she likes to support when she

can. So whenever she gets the phone calls of “are you willing to donate some money?” she does. If I was asked to donate I know that in future years I would because I believe in what the school has to offer.

For Lucy, the idea of being able to give back financially seemed like an idea more for the future: “If I had a lot of money, I might want to try to donate it, but I do not. I don’t know if that’s an actual goal or if it’s just something that it would be nice to be able to do...I think that I would try to at least give a little bit to show that I do care about the university, and I want to see it succeed.”

Awareness of Need

The participants’ thoughts on their future involvement with the institution were influenced on their feelings toward the needs of the university for their contributions of time or money. Meredith, living locally, has been able to stay connected to the institution and often talks with others about the current state of the university. When talking of her desire to give back financially in the future, Meredith stated:

Since I worked at the bookstore I see the manager there from time to time and he has told me how enrollment is down and the numbers are down and [the institution] is making cuts all over the place. It’s hard to go anywhere without hearing that. I see all of the benefits that I reaped from going here, and I would hope that those continue. It would scare me to think that the university could suffer so much that they would have to shut their doors or collaborate with another school or something. I would hate to see the school fall apart.

Sam noted similar concerns, but his were more specific to the needs of the radio station, which was a large area of involvement for him. When asked what specifically would make him want to give back financially, he stated:

Seeing the areas that I was in especially that need the help. The radio is self-sufficient really. They get the space from the university. Any money that they bring in stays with them. There really isn't a ton of money...essentially, people donate to the station to keep it running. I'd like to be able to do that, to just write them an anonymous check...since I've worked for them I know that they can actually do good stuff. I want to give back to them because I know they can continue to do that kind of stuff if they have the funds for it. They just really don't, unfortunately, because the university is in major debt anyway, but that's a whole other topic.

In addition to noting the need the university has for alumni donations or involvement, some of the participants also noted that their decisions to become involved would be dependent on whether or not the university showed them that they were needed and asked for their help. Sean stated:

If they ever asked me, and if I had the time, I think there is a big opportunity for them to do mentoring. I think there are a lot of alumni who would come and talk to people or take a small group and talk to them. Or even just job shadowing. I've thought to myself that once I've established myself in this [position], and once we're in a place where the medical home is running and maintaining, I will have no problem asking my manager if we could propose to someone from health studies an internship here. Bring them on over!

Personal Experiences

The participants' reflections and memories of their experiences at the institution impacted their desire to want to give back to ensure the opportunities for those experiences will remain available for future generations at the university. While Meredith's current involvement is with her former department, she shares that she would be more than happy to donate her time in other areas as well:

I believe in every department at this school. Having taken general education classes, you see a lot of the different areas. I know that this was the perfect place for me. Wherever you go, you figure out if that's the right place for you. If you're meant to be somewhere else, you'll see it. I know this was where I was supposed to be, and where I was meant to spend my four years. I know there are people that will continue to experience that and I want to help that happen for them too. I would be glad to donate in the future. If there was any other involvement, or volunteering for events, I would do it whether or not it was music specific. I support the school.

Her memories of her time at the institution have impacted her to want to contribute in an effort to create a legacy that will allow future students to create memories just as she did.

Chad differed from Meredith in that despite his enjoyment of his time at the institution, his involvement would still be directed toward areas he had directly been involved with. He discussed his current motivation to be involved and stated:

I haven't really given back to the university itself, and I don't know how much I will as a whole. Yes, the university is important and it did allow me the opportunity to get involved with the things that I did as an undergraduate, but my

connection is more with those individual groups of people as opposed to the actual university as a whole. So that's what I try to do. I work with those individual groups and departments to really give back to them and see what I can do to help the students more so than the university. So, helping the university is good because they can distribute what you give to the different departments, but for me I'd rather see that impact and be much more hands on with it. I'd rather work directly with the students than to work with the university.

Sam noted that the help he received from fraternity brothers while an undergraduate is a large part of why he wanted to give back by serving as an advisor for the current students. He said, "I hope I can be that type of mentor for the freshmen and sophomores. It's just a matter of them using me as a resource."

Lucy expressed how experiences she is currently having with faculty from the institution will likely influence her desire to connect back in the future. As she applies to graduate school, she has utilized multiple professors for letters of reference. She spoke of future volunteerism with the institution when saying: "I think just being able to reach back as maybe someone from an academic standpoint. I think maybe being involved in my former department in some way would be kind of cool."

While Chad had many positive things to say regarding his desire to be involved, he noted, also, that it was a lack of some opportunities during his undergraduate experience that has pushed him to strive to offer those experiences for future students:

In terms of bringing other students into my classroom, it's kind of cool for me, because I get to give them an opportunity that I wish had been done for me. I still had some of these experiences, but it would have been really cool to hear that

there was an opportunity to go help out in a classroom and get some more hands on experience outside of practicum. That was one major thing for me. That was an experience I always wanted, so when talking with my professor I said, ‘I’ll offer it! Let’s find a way to get them in the classroom.’”

During his interview, Sean also noted that reflection on undergraduate experience impacts not only his own, but any alumni’s, decision to be involved: “Well, I guess I would have to say, in my opinion, it would have to start with what they did on campus, how involved they were.”

Summary

This chapter explored the themes found during analysis of the participants’ interviews. The themes that emerged fell under 14 categories which included: extra-curricular involvement, academic fit, sense of community, resume guidance, career service events, established relationships, internship and hands-on experience, sense of preparedness, career satisfaction, extra-curricular volunteerism, professors and academic departments, financial contribution, awareness of need, and personal experiences. Chapter V will summarize previous chapters, provide recommendations for university professionals, and suggest recommendations for future research based upon the experiences of the participants.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

This research study utilized a qualitative approach to gauge alumni perceptions of their career attainment and its effect on their level of alumni involvement. The purpose of this study was to investigate the contextual conditions related to alumni involvement with their undergraduate institution. A secondary purpose was to investigate the patterns and means of engagement between alumni and career service centers. Alumni involvement and contribution is a vital factor in the success of a university. Therefore, the following research questions were asked: (1) What is the context of the participants' experience as an undergraduate?; (2) What were the interactions and engagements between the participant and career services during the undergraduate experience?; (3) What are the opinions and feelings of the participant in terms of his or her job attainment?; (4) In what ways are participants involved with their undergraduate institutions?; (5) What elements affect the participant's decision to engage with the university? This chapter will discuss the results of the study, provide recommendations for professionals in the field, and suggest future areas of study on this topic.

Significance of Findings

Feelings Toward Alumni Role

Financial capability is one of the largest impacting factors on whether or not alumni choose to give back to their university (Meer & Rosen, 2009; Newman & Petrosko, 2011; Wunnava & Okunade, 2013). While many of the participants believed it falls within the role of an alumnus or alumna to give back to their institutions, and they all hope to one day be able to do so, as recent alumni, they do not view themselves as

capable of filling that role. On this topic, Sam stated: “I really enjoyed my time here, and I really appreciate everything the university did for me, so I’d like to give back eventually. It’s just a matter of being able to give back eventually.” Meredith agreed that she had a desire to give back, but it was more of a future aspect for her: “If I was asked to donate I know that in future years I would because I believe in what the school has to offer.”

Along these lines, many alumni view their interactions with an institution of higher education as a business transaction (Wastyn, 2009). As such, they do not place priority on giving back. When asked if he currently gives back to the institution, Sean said: “Oh, no. Not until my loans are paid off. I’m still paying for the education I got from them.” Sean further reinforced this statement when he talked of how he has not heard from the institution since graduating and shared his feelings toward the lack of contact: “I don’t really care because I got what I needed, and I’m doing what I wanted to do.”

It was interesting that during the interviews, a few of the participants did not view themselves as alumni of the institution. They agreed on the value of alumni giving and contribution and had ideas of what this role would look like for them in the future, but the title of alumni was not one that they currently took ownership of. Meredith shared: “Honestly, I don’t feel like an alumna, and that’s probably for several reasons...I forget that I really am an alumna...Sometimes I don’t like to think about that. I like to pretend that I still go here because I miss those times a lot and it went by so quickly.” These types of statements relate closely to the importance of creating a contextual alumni experience that can mirror the satisfaction found within the undergraduate experience. Previous

research has shown this as an important reason for increased communication and utilization of social media to continue to connect with these individuals on a regular basis following their graduation (Daly, 2013; Lawson, Kleinholz, & Bodle, 2011; Tsao and Coll, 2005). Lucy shared how she has not received any official communications from her department since she has graduated and noted a lack of communication in other areas as well: “To be honest, I haven’t heard anything from the Alumni Association since then. I think maybe I’ve seen a couple of email communications, but other than that, I haven’t seen a whole lot.” She did note, however, that she would want to be involved if someone were to reach out to her and ask: “I would be glad that they were reaching out to me or that they felt they could reach out to me for something like this.” Sean’s statement reinforced this when asked about his communication with the institution since graduating: “I wouldn’t say I’m positive or negative on it. It’s just not there.”

Undergraduate Context and Involvement Areas

Research on the topic of alumni involvement has continuously shown that positive associations with the undergraduate experience equate to a higher likelihood for alumni involvement (Cunningam and Cochi-Ficano, 2002; Mulugetta, Nash, and Murphy, 1999; Taylor and Martin, 1995; Weerts and Ronca, 2009). This is created more specifically through close-knit relationships with faculty and academic departments (Cunningam and Cochi-Ficano, 2002) and through extra-curricular experiences made positive by student affairs professionals (Taylor and Martin, 1995). In this study, participants reinforced the point that positive undergraduate experiences led to a greater desire to become involved, either financially or through volunteerism. Lucy’s statement highlighted this idea: “My own passion for the school made me want to do more for the

school, made me want to be more involved with my university.” In fact, it was these specific areas of involvement and satisfaction that resulted in the participants’ sole roles of current volunteerism. Weerts and Ronca (2009) detailed how engaged alumni are those who have felt a sense of connection to faculty and have had the ability to engage in meaningful dialogue with those faculty and staff members while an undergraduate. Chad, one of the more involved alumni currently, had relationships with faculty members that echo the ideas of Weerts and Ronca: “I had a really positive experience. If I’m on campus and I have an opportunity I always try to go around and visit my professors...I was able to build some really good relationships out of this program, and that’s been a really nice thing.” Sean, too, associated his positive experience within his academic department as a reason to give back: “Like with [the panel] I’m doing Monday, hands down, no questions asked, yeah I’ll go do it because I’m supporting my department, my major.”

Despite some indications of desires to give back to the institution more broadly in the future, all of the participants currently give back solely to departments or extra-curricular organizations which they noted as instrumental pieces in their experience. Sam’s statements showed this as he noted that he wanted to give back to those areas that gave to him during his time at the institution: “Right now I’m an advisor, so I’m giving back to the fraternity that helped me through everything.” Chad, again, reinforced the decision to give back directly to those areas that were key to his experiences: “For me the major impact was with the individual groups of people that I worked with. I guess in terms of giving back to the University itself, I work with specific groups still.”

Another contextual condition related to these experiences is the relationships built with the institution. One relationship of value and with a positive correlation to alumni

involvement is that of the legacy family (Meer and Rosen, 2010). Both Lucy and Meredith are legacies to the institution, and both have expressed a desire to give back to the institution, with Meredith specifically citing philanthropic role modeling by her mother as a source of encouragement: “My mom went to [the institution], and I know that she likes to support when she can. If I was asked to donate I know that in future years I would because I believe in what the school has to offer.” Lucy’s statement reinforced Meredith’s when she shared that: “My mom went here, so she’s an alumna. I knew she really liked [the institution]. I knew that she liked the faculty she worked with, the class sizes, etc. Hearing her point of view on how she liked it influenced me.”

Even indirectly, hearing of the ability to have access to a positive experience of connectivity with faculty influenced Lucy’s decision to come to the institution. This statement shows first-hand how a positive association with the undergraduate experience aids in alumni involvement, in this case creating a legacy with the institution through the application and admission of Lucy to the school.

Perceived Career Assistance

Positive perceptions of career assistance from the university have been shown through the research to influence alumni involvement (Hunter, Jones, and Boger, 1999; Johnson, Thomas, and Peck, 2010). Similarly, alumni view a need for and place value on receiving career guidance from the institution (Fouad, Guillen, Harris-Hodge, Henry, Novakovic, Terry, and Kantamneni, 2006). That being said, the alumni participants of this study did not indicate a relationship between their satisfaction with career services and their current volunteerism or desire to give in the future. As all participants are currently involved and/or have expressed interest to giving back in the future, but had

varied experiences of satisfaction with career services, a perceived correlation cannot be said to exist. Sean did not find a great deal of value through his interactions with career services: “Once I was building a resume, and to be totally honest I thought that was a joke.” On the other hand, Lucy greatly valued the assistance she received: “I was really grateful for it...I had a lot of friends that also didn’t know what they were doing with their life, so I felt like they helped me out a lot.” Despite this difference in opinion, both have expressed their desire to give back in some way (even if it is at the departmental level) in the future. One thing that could be said regarding this is that despite varying perceptions of satisfaction and usefulness of their career service center interaction, all participants did utilize career services for resume building or career fairs at some point during their experience.

As noted throughout discussions, participants of this study placed emphasis on their interactions with individual departments and the relationships they built through these and extra-curricular involvements. Multiple participants also noted utilizing professors or student affairs staff for career guidance and assistance. When asked whom he went to for career guidance both as an undergraduate and today as an alumnus, Chad stated: “It’s kind of a broad range. Some professors, some staff members that I worked with.” He also discussed how he still talks with and assists a professor who helped mentor him as an undergraduate: “I talk with [a professor] quite a bit because he is the one who met me as a freshman and guided me through education as a whole...So, typically, it’s the people that provided advice and guidance that I still try to keep in contact with.” Lucy reinforced this view when asked if she thought faculty or staff played a role in her career success: “A lot actually. I really did confide in a lot of my advisors

and even my professors too.” Sean believes that this relationship has transcended beyond the undergraduate experience and stated: “I honestly think I could go back to any of [my professors] right now and ask them for a letter of recommendation or I could just walk into their office and talk to them.” Lucy’s statements affirm this fact and she has put it into action while applying for graduate school: “I’ve talked to three different professors that I had here who have all agreed that they would definitely write me a letter.” Johnson, Thomas, and Peck (2010) found that alumni of an MBA program they studied were more likely to give back financially to that MBA department based upon how much career assistance they perceived they had received from the department. The statements of the participants reinforce this idea as they most actively give back to individual departments (or plan to in the future) and these are also the individuals from whom they have gleaned the greatest value in their career preparation and success.

Recommendations

After analyzing the data gathered from the five participants in this study and the collective research on this topic, there are several recommendations for higher education professionals that can be enacted to better serve the alumni community, thus garnering increased alumni involvement. The first of these recommendations is to create a culture of philanthropic giving while these individuals are still students at the institution.

Specifically, we should be sharing the importance and need for their involvement as alumni, as early as their first year at the school. This can be done in a variety of ways, but two suggestions would be to have students begin calling their peers asking for a small donation for the institution each year (\$5 or less). This helps the students to create a habit of giving to the institution. Lucy stated that “If I had a lot of money, I might want to try

to donate it, but I do not.” By creating a tradition of financial gifts in small amounts while the students are still undergraduates, they will see that even small donations can contribute and make a difference. The second way to do this would be to spread awareness through campaigns on specific, important days. Tabling events could be held on campus showing students that the academic year would end that day if only government funding was used to run the institution or, similarly, the academic year would end that day if only tuition were covering the costs of running the university.

A second suggestion to alumni relations and student affairs professionals would be to increase connectivity following graduation. This could be an initiative that is run through each individual department. The participants of the study clearly depicted that they primarily wanted to remain involved with their academic department or extra-curricular involvement areas, so it makes sense then to transfer some of the work of the alumni relations offices to these individual departments. This will alleviate some of the strain on the alumni relations office while also allowing the students to feel as though they are hearing from someone they knew while at the institution (i.e. their department). The participants indicated that they would be willing to help, if only they were asked to do so. Even if the result of this is that they choose to give back financially or by volunteering to that specific department, this will still alleviate costs and allow the university to reallocate unrestricted funds to others areas.

My third and final recommendation would be to ensure that students have some sort of connection or relationship while an undergraduate that aids in their career development. Ideally, this will come through interactions with career services on campus. The participants of this study all had a sense of the university or its employees assisting

them in their career attainment, and as such they had positive recollections and memories associated with the institution. One area of implementation for this could be a requirement that all students attend an event hosted by career services during their first or second year. This will alleviate any stigma associated with the service while also providing all students at the institution with access to career assistance. Ideally, this will lead to more successful alumni, and due to their positive experiences with the institution and appreciation for its help, they will want to give back in some way.

Suggestions for Future Research

While unplanned and unintentional, all of the participants in this study live within a 45 minute commute of the institution. This could affect their interactions and involvement due to the ease of accessibility to the university. A suggestion for future research would be to conduct this same study with alumni who live a greater distance away from the institution, or even alumni who no longer reside in the same state. I would also suggest conducting this same study with alumni from a larger variety of graduating years. While I kept my participant pool as graduates from the past five years, the results would be valuable to the field if this spectrum were broadened.

A future study with a more diverse participant pool would be beneficial. Recommendations resulted in all participants being white. A study that reflected a more diverse ethnic and socio-economic pool would be beneficial.

All of the participants in this study hold a bachelors degree only. Future researchers could study individuals who have gone on to obtain higher level degrees and look to see what effect that has on their relationships with their undergraduate institutions. Along these lines, another suggestion for research would be to conduct this

study with individuals who only received their master's degree at the institution, and not their bachelor's degree. If they placed value in the assistance this second degree gave them in terms of career development, it would be possible that this could affect their perceptions of their alumni status at the institution.

A longitudinal study with the same group of participants could provide interesting results to the field. This would allow the researcher to see how their viewpoints change over time and whether or not they hold true to their opinions on involvement.

Conclusion

This study was conducted utilizing a qualitative approach to better understand alumni perceptions of their career success and their involvement with their undergraduate institution. Chapter V consisted of a discussion of the results from this study. The results indicated that the alumni hope to be financially involved in the future when they view themselves as capable of doing so. These results also indicated that the participants currently volunteer their time with individual academic departments and other areas that they noted as being of value to their personal and career development. Recommendations were provided for student affairs professionals to utilize when creating effective alumni programs and cultures of giving on their campuses. This will ensure the long-term success of the institution through increased alumni involvement and connectivity.

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APPENDIX A**Informed Consent Form****CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH*****Contextual Conditions Related to University Career Service, Job Attainment, and Alumni Involvement: A Qualitative Study***

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Kasey Evans and Dr. Rick Roberts, from the Counseling and Student Development department at Eastern Illinois University. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether or not to participate.

You have been asked to participate in this study because you are an alumnus or alumna of Eastern Illinois University who graduated in the past 5 years.

• PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The research study focuses on contextual conditions related to University Career Service, job attainment, and alumni involvement. This survey is being conducted as part of an assignment for the course CSD 5950, Thesis and Research, as a requirement for the Master's of Science program in College Student Affairs here at Eastern Illinois University.

• PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study:

- You will be asked to interview with the primary investigator of the study for approximately one hour on the topic of the perceptions of University Career Service, job attainment, and alumni involvement.
- The interview will be audio and video recorded, however the researcher will not place your name on any documents resulting from the interview.
- You have the right to terminate your participation at any time without penalty.
- Your participation in this research will be kept confidential.
- Findings from this research project will be shared with student affairs administrators.
- Your decision to participate, decline, or withdraw from participation will not affect your current status or future relations with Eastern Illinois University.

• POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

There are no foreseen risks or discomforts

- **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**

Improvement of Career Service offerings and alumni outreach at Eastern Illinois University.

- **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of pseudonyms of names and storing data on a password protected computer.

Findings may be released to administrators within the student affairs field to improve career service offerings and alumni outreach.

All interviews will be audio and video recorded. Only the Primary Investigator will have access to these files, which will be stored on a password protected computer. Files will be destroyed after 3 years, in accordance with Eastern Illinois University's IRB procedures.

- **PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

Participation in this research study is voluntary and not a requirement or a condition for being the recipient of benefits or services from Eastern Illinois University or any other organization sponsoring the research project. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits or services to which you are otherwise entitled.

There is no penalty if you withdraw from the study and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

- **IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS**

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please contact:

Dr. Rick Roberts

(217) 581-2400

rlroberts@eiu.edu

- **RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS**

If you have any questions or concerns about the treatment of human participants in this study, you may call or write:

Institutional Review Board
Eastern Illinois University
600 Lincoln Ave.
Charleston, IL 61920
Telephone: (217) 581-8576
E-mail: eiuirb@www.eiu.edu

You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with EIU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time. I have been given a copy of this form.

Printed Name of Participant

Signature of Participant

Date

I, the undersigned, have defined and fully explained the investigation to the above subject.

Signature of Investigator

Date

APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol

What is your age?

What year did you graduate from Eastern Illinois University?

What is your gender?

Male

Female

Other

Which of the following best describes your racial or ethnic background?

Asian/Pacific Islander

Black/African-American

Caucasian/White

Hispanic/Latino (a)

Native American/American Indian

Other (please specify)

Are you currently employed?

Yes

No

Are you a member of the Eastern Illinois University Alumni Association?

Yes

No

What is your current involvement as an alumni of Eastern Illinois University?

Have you ever made a monetary donation to Eastern Illinois University?

Did you ever attend a resume or other workshop hosted by the Career Service?

Did you ever schedule and attend an appointment to meet with a career counselor at the Career Service?

Describe your experience with the Career Service.

Do you think the University contributed to your success?

Is there anything else you would like to share?